

AGENCY OF EDUCATION

Barre, Vermont

TEAM: School Governance Team

ITEM: Will the State Board of Education find that the proposed unified union school district formed by two member districts of the **WHITE RIVER VALLEY SUPERVISORY UNION** (WRVSU) is “in the best interests of the State, the students, and the school districts,” and will the State Board therefore vote to approve the attached report of the **WRVSU PK-12 Non-Operating** Study Committee (Study Committee) and to assign the new district, if approved, to the WCSU?

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

- 1. That the State Board of Education finds that the proposed formation of a new unified union school district by two member districts of the WRVSU, to be named the GRANVILLE-HANCOCK UNIFIED DISTRICT, is “in the best interests of the State, the students, and the school districts” pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706c(b).**
- 2. That the State Board of Education votes to approve the attached report of the WRVSU PK-12 Non-Operating Study Committee.**
- 3. That the State Board of Education votes to approve the assignment of the new unified union school district, if approved, to the WRVSU for administrative, supervisory, and transitional services pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706h beginning on the date on which the district becomes a legal entity pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706g.**

STATUTORY AUTHORITY: 16 V.S.A. § 706c; Act 46 of 2015; Act 153 of 2010, Secs. 2-4, as amended; Act 156 (2012), Sec. 15, as amended

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

I. General

The WRVSU consists of ten town school districts with five distinct models of governance:

- Four town school districts, each of which operates a school offering PK/K-12 (Bethel; Chelsea; Rochester; Royalton)
- One town school district that operates a school offering education through Grade 8 and pays tuition for Grades 9-12 (Tunbridge)
- One town school district that operates a school offering education through Grade 8 and designates an approved independent school as its public school for Grades 9-12 pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 827 (Strafford)
- Two town school districts, both of which operate a school offering education through Grade 6 and pay tuition for Grades 7-12 (Sharon; Stockbridge)

- Two town school districts that pay tuition for all grades (Granville; Hancock)

Until recently, the districts in the WRVSU were members of two distinct supervisory unions. At the request of the State Board, the ten districts began the process of merging into a single SU in 2014, which included creating a guiding educational vision for the region.¹ As described in the over-arching, combined report of the three WRVSU study committees, the vision document made clear that:

the creation of the new supervisory union is not simply about merging business functions or the changing of boundaries; rather it is building a foundational structure that will:

- *Allow for the creation of an exceptional education experience for all children in the White River Valley.*
- *Ensure strong leadership to support the education program throughout the region.*
- *Achieve immediate efficiencies and create the potential for greater cost-effectiveness over time.*

The State Board approved the merger of the two SUs into the WRVSU in January 2015. Prior to assuming full responsibilities as the WRVSU in July 2016, the member districts conducted a strategic planning process for the delivery of education in the region. The process involved staff, students, and the community and was assisted by the International Center for Leadership in Education.² The 5-year plan “calls for the creation of a unified high school program for operating towns, strong middle school opportunities for all students, and strengthened, more equitable experiences for elementary students.”

After passage of Act 46, the ten districts created an exploratory committee³ to examine options available to them. Based upon the work of the exploratory committee, the districts formed three formal study committees under 16 V.S.A. § 706 to develop proposals to create:

II. The Granville-Hancock Unified District

The WRVSU PK-12 Non-operating Study Committee proposes the creation of a UUSD that would provide for the PK-12 education of resident students by paying tuition for students in all grades (New Unified District) beginning on July 1, 2018.

The Study Committee identifies the following school districts as “necessary” to the proposal pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706b(b)(1): Granville; Hancock.

The Study Committee does not identify any school districts as “advisable” to the proposal pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 701b(b)(2).

¹ See Appendix A – Report on the Proposed Supervisory Union Boundary Change, dated January 6, 2015

² See Appendix B – WRVSU Strategic Plan: Blueprint for Change 2016-2021

³ See Appendix C – Exploratory Committee Report and Recommendation

In FY2016, the combined average daily membership (ADM) of the two districts was 90.35 (Granville: 36.00; Hancock: 54.35) and the combined ADM of all ten WRVSU districts was 1,690.29.

The electorate of each “necessary” district will vote on April 11, 2017 whether to approve creation of the New Unified District.

The New Unified District would be created only if voters in other WRVSU districts approve the WRVSU PK-12 Operating Study Committee’s proposal to form a unified union school district that operates all grades beginning on July 1, 2018 (the White River Unified School District) in a manner that makes the New Unified District eligible for incentives under the “Side-by-Side” program established in Act 156 of 2012, Sec. 15.

The New Unified District, which would be known as the Granville-Hancock Unified District, would provide for the education of its resident PK-12 students by paying tuition pursuant to the provisions of Title 16. The proposal would unify the merging school districts into a single unified district and would replace their respective governing bodies with one unified union school board.

The New Unified District would be governed by a school board of six members, who would be elected by the voters of each town in a number that is closely proportional to the town’s relative population. Initial membership on the board is allocated at three members each.

The merger vote and election of initial board members would take place by Australian ballot, as required by statute. All later votes on the budget, board membership, and other public questions would be conducted at an annual or special meeting of the New Unified District pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 562.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: By enacting Act 46, which incorporated the provisions of Act 153 (2010), the General Assembly declared the intention to move the State toward sustainable models of education governance designed to meet the goals set forth in Section 2 of the Act. It was primarily through the lens of those goals that the Secretary has considered whether the Study Committee’s proposal is “in the best interests of the State, the students, and the school districts” pursuant to 16 V.S.A. § 706c.

EDUCATION IMPLICATIONS:

Both of the potentially merging districts provides for the PK-12 education of its students by paying tuition to the public or approved independent school in which the student is enrolled. Granville students currently attend 17 different schools; Hancock students attend 15. Students will continue to have the same opportunity to enroll in public and independent schools in a unified district.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The Study Committee states:

Granville and Hancock have had actual student counts in the neighborhood of 35-50 in recent years. With such small numbers, a single family moving in or out of a

district can radically change variables that go into local tax rates. This happens in two ways. A sudden loss in student count will impact the “cost-per-student” calculation—a key element in determining local tax rates. Secondly, a family moving into the district after budget approval can result in sizable deficit spending which must then be covered in later years, bumping the tax rate in the out-years.

Creating a larger district of 90-100 students will create somewhat less volatility. Losses or gains of students connected to several families will have a less dramatic influence than if they occur in a district half the size. In essence, unification creates a larger “risk pool” for the taxpayers in the region.

See the Report at pages 60-63, Attachment A, and appendices A-C, for a more detailed discussion of educational and fiscal elements of the proposal.

The Study Committee’s proposal is aligned with the goals of the General Assembly as set forth in Act 46 of 2015 and with the policy underlying the union school district formation statutes as articulated in 16 V.S.A. § 701.

STAFF AVAILABLE:

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